

Jon Woodson: On "Middle Passages"

Like other poets who wished to compose long poems in the mode of *The Waste Land*, Robert Hayden had not only to resolve the many problems inherent in such a project, but he also had to negotiate another complement of difficulties occasioned by the distance from which he was forced to contemplate American society. Hayden's account of his own appropriation of the long poem is revealing. The most striking feature of Hayden's career is that he did not begin as a modernist poet. Reading Stephen Vincent Benet's poem *John Brown's Body* (1928) moved Hayden to attempt the writing of an epic poem about the efforts by blacks to gain their freedom during the slavery era, the Civil War, and its aftermath. Hayden began his epic in a style similar to Benet's and won the Hopwood Award in 1942 with sections of "The Black Spear," written in blank verse. In an interview with Paul McCluskey in 1972, Hayden's description of the creation of "Middle Passage," the opening section of "The Black Spear," doesn't address Hayden's shift from classical to high modernist poetics: he observed that he was dissatisfied with "The Black Spear because it was too much like Benet, and that after a year of revising "gradually a form began to suggest itself." Hayden added, "The style, or method, might be thought of as, in a way, cinematic, for very often one scene ends and another begins without any obvious transitional elements." In the same interview, Hayden comments that his poem contains different voices—the voice of the poet that "at times . . . seems to merge with voices from the past, voices not intended to be clearly identified" as well as the voices of the traders, of the hymn-singers, and "perhaps even of the dead."

Despite Ponthela Williams's assertion of Hayden's uniqueness and brilliance in the face of her acknowledgment of Hayden's debt to Eliot and Pound, Hayden did not so much realize the form that his poem could take as much as he realized the form his poem should take. Had Hayden refused to accommodate the demands of high modernist practice, African American poetry would have remained aesthetically archaic, removed from contemporary discourse, and a further demonstration that blacks were culturally retrograde. The most salient breakthrough that Hayden accomplished was the realization that whereas the "mythic histories," "the poems including history" of Eliot, Pound, Crane, and Williams, fell outside of the concerns of most Americans, "mythical histories" written for African Americans would necessarily find a captivated audience.

In constructing "Middle Passage," Robert Hayden borrowed directly from Eliot, Pound, and Crane much more than has been acknowledged by his critics. Hayden's use of the "cinematic" technique of montage can ultimately be attributed to Eliot's stylistic innovation; however, Hayden's most numerous and consistent direct appropriations are from Pound and Crane as well. From Pound, Hayden derived the use of documents and the use of a "historic character who can be used as illustration of intelligent constructivity." From Crane, Hayden derived the narrator who is a "floating singer," the catalogs of the names of ships, and some of the vocabulary (e.g. "corposant").

"Middle Passage" has a deceptively simple structure: the poem consists of three sections, each of which tells a brief story. The materials that are cinematically collaged serve to disguise and complicate this simple narrative structure, for they intersperse fragments of history in the form of names, diaries, and snatches of disembodied ruminations in the interest

of deepening the temporal scope. Despite Hayden's adoption of Pound's documentary method of introducing history into poetry, his goal differs from Pound's, who never moves away from the contents of his own mind. Like the symbolist poet Yeats, Hayden seeks to revive a mythic past, yet he must accomplish this by means that are essentially realistic and self-articulated. Hayden's goal was, then, to erect a racial myth out of the materials of history.

After the speech of the outraged Spaniard, the poem concludes with a six-line coda: in these lines Cinquez is identified by the poet-narrator and thereby personifies the "deathless primaver image" of "the deep immortal human wish, / the timeless will." The poem is brought to an end with the lines that have been used to establish a motif, appearing formerly in the first section and in a varied form at the beginning of the third section: "Voyage through death / to life upon these shores."

Hayden's method is to present historical detail as though historical events compose a body of evidence that incriminates the slave traders, and, by extension, Western Christian culture. Hayden's faithfulness to the Eliotic doctrine of impersonality has determined the narratological strategy of "Middle Passage": the slaves are never presented directly, and they do not speak for themselves. In its simplest form, the poem pairs examples of the worst horrors of the slave trade with examples of the religious hypocrisy of the Christians who profited from its merciless operation. Yet because the poem opens cinematically with a sweeping "objective" gesture—the recitation of the names of the slave ships that has the effect of a pan of the camera—the slave traders also are distanced and are not yet allowed to speak for themselves: these distancing devices are largely responsible for endowing the poem with an aura of self-articulated historical event. However, the poem's self-articulation is challenged by the discontinuous presentation of the scenes, for when this effect is examined, the narratological consciousness that orders and presents the scenes soon becomes evident. What the poem musters as history must now be recognized as argument.

Thus, the history in Hayden's epic is illusory, a matter of semantic interpolations. The names of the ships are mere names, and, as signs, are not containers of history. While their semiotic value is that, for the poet-narrator, they are icons of the discourses of Christianity, sailing, and commercial enterprise, they are not in themselves, as the poet-narrator must say, "ironical." The poet-narrator wishes to present the ships as objective correlatives of the failed moral code of Christianity and thereby to indicate that a naturally occurring semiotic (and symbolic) situational irony exists in the conjunction of the names and function of the slave ships. This type of irony, however, actually exists as a substitutive myth that is being fabricated by the associative and sign-making efforts of the poet-narrator. "Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy": to the namers of the ships, the Christian myth that enfolded and motivated their activities was as solid a conceptual map of their culture as the poet-narrator's rejection of the interpretants of European myth and the conception of an African American antimyth is indicative of his own cultural mythmaking.

The "impersonal" rhetoric of Hayden's epic is designed to disguise the fact that an operation of mythic inversion is taking place: the poet-narrator has taken the approach that the documentary depictions of the depredations of the Christian enslavers of the Africans are all that need to be shown in order that the poem will establish the "mirage and myth and actual shore" that the poet-narrator sees blended in the history of the building up of the Americas. However, we have only to realize the implications of Hayden's argument in order to grasp the absolutist and ideologically conservative nature of his discourse. Hayden's rereading of history might at first seem inevitable and inescapable because the poet-narrator speaks from the point of view of the "good" in order to show the "evil" of the traders in slaves. However, we

may deconstruct this view of the slave trade by reflecting upon the fact that the poem does not enact Cinquez's transfiguration so much as it justifies and then dramatizes Cinquez's slaughter of the crew of the *Amistad*. The poem avoids the direct engagement of moral problems by shifting the ground of its argument to the symbolic mode of agency: "Middle Passage" enacts a relativistic reversal of the controlling myth from the Christian and imperial law of the Europeans and substitutes for it the mythic agency of the revolutionary "will" of the Africans. What we see of this retributive "will," as it is expressed in the person of Cinquez as a transfigured agent, is that he is as ruthless as the self-righteous Spaniard who narrates the climactic events of the mutiny in the poem's final section. As in *The Tempest*, which serves as the paradigm of "Middle Passage," the action proceeds judicially, while those on trial remain unaware of the ongoing process. However, because the poet-narrator is at once Ariel, Prospero, and Caliban, there is no voice to take on Ariel's role as sympathetic intercessor for Sebastian and Antonio ("if you now beheld them, your affections / would become tender," 5.1.18-19) and, likewise, to speak against the condemnation of the Spaniard who has been cast in the role of villain by the poet-narrator.

The dramatic structure of "Middle Passage" places Cinquez parallel to *The Guinea Rose* and *King Anthracite* as recipients of the actions of the Europeans, who are the poem's prime agents until the entrance of Cinquez; moreover, we also see Cinquez in a speech that attempts to reassert action upon him. However, the semiotic relationship between Cinquez and the other Africans who figure in the narratives that precede the Spaniard's diatribe is quite different, for we are not presented with the example of *King Anthracite* and *The Guinea Rose* in order to see in them examples of deathless "will" or transfiguration, as we are in the case of Cinquez. Perhaps we do not see the agency of "will" in its problematic relation to the poem until we try to ascertain Cinquez's role in the poem. The poem establishes a group/individual dialectic alongside the more obvious black/white dialectic: this group/individual dialectic is problematic, since the European speakers represent "history" and appear in an African American poem as concrete examples of their culture's moral failure. In opposition to these acts of history speaking for itself through documents that are supposedly objective and impersonal, we have only the example of Cinquez as interpreted by the poet-narrator after we are presented with the Spaniard's speech?the speech that we must interpret ironically, because the poet?narrator, who is also the judge, implies that its meaning is ironical. Cinquez, then, comes to signify the "transfiguration" of a group, the collective entity of the slaves, even though he is presented to us as an individual, a name, and a hero. Conversely, actions of individual evil committed by the Europeans signify only at the collective level, for otherwise their actions would not be ironic.

Hayden's "Middle Passage" is rather like a *Tempest* in which Caliban is not allowed to speak for himself. At first we seem to see the actions from the view of an impartial poet-narrator, and what we are shown seems to be, history. However, when we ask who the poet-narrator is, we soon recognize that Caliban does indeed speak, for he has taken on the powers of Ariel: as Ariel, Caliban shows us his debased and silent state through the consciousness (and consciences) of his oppressors. Later we see Caliban finally rise against Prospero to assume the power of the former master, and we do not question what we see because the special effects are so deft. Hayden has, for example, employed allusions to remove the poet-narrator's need to present the slaves directly, allusions to two European literary works ("*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" and *The Tempest*), both of which (ironically) wrestle with issues of power and forgiveness and betrayal and reconciliation.

By alluding to Coleridge's "*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," Hayden is able to suggest the

problem of European guilt: in contrast to Coleridge's narrator, the Ancient Mariner, the three dominant voices who speak in each section of "Middle Passage," "the deponent," the slave-catcher, and the Spaniard, show no signs of remorse or awareness of their evil. These three speakers represent the destruction, respectively, of African social relations, African civil order, and (again, ironically) European religious/moral and legal/civil order. The writer of the "8 bells" section is problematic, however, for in this fragment of a ship's log we have the suggestion of a figure who is able to recognize and express the criminal nature of the actions that have been committed in the name of the salvation of the African pagans: thus Hayden invokes a European text to indicate the moral failings of European culture. Hayden had no choice but to include this assessment within the poem, since the recognition of the contradictions within European culture is an important component of that culture; however, to allow European texts to voice a realization of European immorality undercuts the absolutist thrust of the poem's dialectical articulation of history.

That Hayden's employment of myth is so reductively absolutist also has the effect of forcing him to shift historical factuality into mythmaking. Since the poem restricts itself to only the middle passage, it cannot evaluate the theme of "life upon these shores" even while evoking the themes of futurity and transcendence in the poem's concluding lines: "Voyage through death / to life upon these shores." We are allowed to witness the triumph of Cinquez's survival but not the historical facts of his escape: thus his slavery alone is life, while his life is reduced to the voyage. Moreover, we are being asked to ignore the fact that "deathless" Cinquez's survival is paid for in the same bloody coin as the lives of the Europeans, by the destruction of the Other: yet this remorseless violence is the agency of Cinquez's transfiguration.

To engage in moral absolutism with regard to history, as Hayden does in "Middle Passage," is to construct a myth and to revise history with an eye toward a distinctly moral interpretation. The revision is particularly evident when we learn that Cinquez was not a prince but a rice planter, was made a hero by the white Americans who freed him, and did not remain in America but returned to live out his life in Africa. In Hayden's scheme the two emblems of European purpose, religion and law, are shown to be bankrupt; "the timeless will" of the poem's concluding movement, on which the poem hangs its meaning, is the same will as that which is the driving force of European civilization, yet it has been rendered unrecognizable as will by the destruction of its mythic icons in the three sections of the poem. The will to which Hayden points is the same will to power that exists in all humans, African and European, the will that the Europeans express by conducting the slave trade: in speaking of Nietzsche's book *The Genealogy of Morals*, Hayden White has observed that "men looked at the world in ways that conformed to the purposes which motivated them; and they required different visions of history to justify the various projects which they had to undertake in order to realize their humanity fully." This idea may be neither comforting nor savory, nor is it pleasant to realize that Hayden's attempt to transfigure Cinquez is a semiotic adjustment; what does Cinquez signify if not the dialectical conversion of Caliban into Prospero and, thereby, the ahistorical man into the historical man?

By rising against Prospero, Caliban merely becomes Prospero: the inadequacy of the symbolic means to accomplish Cinquez's transfiguration is made tangible in that Hayden himself felt that the conclusion of the poem did not ring true in his ears and that after four revisions it still required a strengthening that it never adequately received.

The conceptual fault in "Middle Passage" is that Hayden overlooked the fact that *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* achieve their synthesis by assuming, in the final analysis, a superhistorical stance expressive of spiritual wholeness and a transcendence of the dualities

and tautologies within which Hayden's poem remains marooned. History, in "Middle Passage," is present as text: it is the textual presentation of what happens to the historyless and unhistorical Africans. Finally, Cinquez's "transfiguration," which the poet-narrator speaks into existence in its closing lines, is Cinquez's entrance into history as an individual, a name, a consciousness, a monad of the historical will.

from "Consciousness, Myth, and Transcendence: Symbolic Action in Three Poems on the Slave Trade" in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*. Ed. Joanne V. Gabbin. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia., 1999. Copyright © 1999 by the Rectors and Visitors of the University of Virginia.

Publication Status:

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Poem:

Middle Passage [4]

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